

GREAT WORDS ABOUT SALVATION

FREE WILL John 8:31-36

Free will is a term that is commonly used in theological and philosophical circles. The issue among scholars is whether a man has a free will or whether he is a robot moved by the forces of fate. Some have felt that man is merely a puppet of a fatalistic God. It seems to natural man that it is impossible for a free creature to exist in the same universe with a sovereign God. Either God is sovereign and man a machine or man is free and God is a victim of man's whims. But what do the scriptures say? How does the Bible seek to solve this difficult problem?

First, the Bible admits a great mystery between the sovereign actions of God and the free actions of men. There is in one sense no way that we will ever solve this problem because we are finite men dealing with an infinite God. Second, it should be observed at the outset of this study that the Bible never uses the word "free will" in any way relating to man's salvation. Free will is used only in terms of free will offerings in the Old Testament. The Bible does speak of "whosoever will", "believing", "coming", "turning", "receiving" and so forth, but it never talks about free will in terms of coming to Christ. Free will, then, is a philosophical term carried over into the realm of theology to help explain man's choice in the salvation process.

FREE WILL PHILOSOPHICALLY CONSIDERED

If a person uses the term free will to refer to man's choice of Christ, this is perfectly Biblical. However, if a person speaks of free will as man's inate ability to choose for Christ, then this is not Biblically or philosophically correct.

Free will as an inate ability would indicate a will totally free of all outside influences. In an absolute sense, free will would be freedom to do anything, anywhere, to anyone at any time, involving a complete independence from God and freedom to act without any outside or restraining forces. No sane person would believe in free will in an absolute sense. Even science would have to admit that complete free will would be inconsistent with natural law. Philosophically, men are not totally free. They are victims of natural law; they are captives of the influences of environment, and they are prey for the thoughts of others. Multiple thousands of outside influences affect a way a man thinks, wills and acts. Logic tells us that at the very beginning of human existence a man had no choice as to where he would be born, what race he would belong to or what social culture he would be born into. At best, man is only relatively free, or as some have stated - man is apparently free.

It is correct to speak of man as a free agent or free soul because the will of man never acts independently of the rest of his faculties which make up his total personality. Man's personality consists of mind, heart and will (intellect, emotion and volition). Man never wills an action unless his will has first been influenced by his mind and emotions. The will, without exception, does what the heart and mind tell it to do. Man's will never acts independently from the rest of his personality.

If by free will, we mean that man has the ability to choose whatever he wants to do, the answer is obvious that he is free in that sense. Man always and only does what he pleases. While man is free to do what he pleases, he is not free to do what he ought, and this is where the Bible so clearly teaches that man is free to choose but he always chooses against God and for evil. Men ought to love God, repent of sin and embrace Christ, but the vast majority do not.

If men are free, why don't they come to Christ? Why won't they receive Him who gives the forgiveness of sins and eternal life? Why don't they fall at the feet of the One, true and living God and worship Him? The answer is sin. Man is a sinner and he wilfully chooses against Christ and God's kingdom.

FREE WILL BIBLICALLY CONSIDERED

The Bible tells us many things about the unsaved man, and these statements of the Bible have a definite bearing on the issue as to whether the natural, unsaved, unregenerate man has a free will.

The Sinful Condition of the Unsaved Man: The unconverted man is spiritually dead. "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). Dead means dead. One cannot be partially alive and partially dead. A man who is physically dead cannot respond in any way, and one who is spiritually dead is a helpless corpse who cannot come to God without divine enablement.

The unconverted man cannot know spiritual things. "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (I Cor. 2:14). An unsaved person cannot understand spiritual realities, and only God can enable him to understand about Christ and salvation.

The unconverted man is blinded by Satan. "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (II Cor. 4:3,4). A blind man cannot see and only a miracle could make it possible for him to see again. God alone can remove the spiritual blindness from the eyes of men to enable them to see Christ.

The unconverted man is not seeking God. "As it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God'" (Rom. 3:10). In his natural state, the unregenerate man does not care about, want or seek any personal relationship with the One, true and living God in Christ. God alone can enable men to truly seek God.

The unconverted man is rebellious. "Because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the Law of God, for it is not even able to do so" (Rom. 8:7). The unsaved man is an enemy of God and has no desire to be His friend. Only God can enable a hostile sinner to become a friend of God.

The unconverted man is under sin and condemned. ". . . for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (Rom. 3:9). God only can enable a man to turn to Christ and come out from bondage to sin and throw off the shackles of condemnation.

The unconverted man is hardened. "(Gentiles) . . . being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart" (Eph. 4:18). The unsaved man is cold, indifferent and hardened to spiritual realities. Only God can soften his heart so he may respond to Christ.

These scriptures tell us immediately that man is not free, for sin has brought him into a horrible spiritual condition. He is in a deplorable, helpless and hopeless condition and is unable by any of his own efforts to come to God.

If you are without Christ, beware of the deceitfulness of sin, and do not rationalize that you are not as bad off as the Bible says you are. Best you listen to God, and flee to Christ who alone can change your sinful condition.

The Spiritual Condition of the Unsaved Man: Man is not only sinful but he is unable in any way to will for God, for there are certain things he cannot do. He cannot see the kingdom of God. "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'" (John 3:3). He cannot hear Christ's words. "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My Word" (John 8:43). He cannot receive the Holy Spirit. "And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be with you" (John 14:16,17). He cannot please God. "And those that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8). He cannot be subject to God's law. "Because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the Law of God, for it is not even able to do so" (Rom. 8:7).

He cannot know the things of the spirit. "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (I Cor. 2:14). He cannot cease from sin. ". . . Having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin" (II Pet. 2:14).

The Bible says that man is not only injured because of sin but he is also plagued with inability to please God.

FREE WILL THEOLOGICALLY CONSIDERED

Defining Depravity: The rub comes whenever Christian men begin to state the sinful condition of men theologically. All evangelical Christians would agree that men are sinful but not all would agree on the depths of man's sin. The debate is really over the extent of the corruption of one's will. The issue is whether man's will is totally or partially depraved. The words "total" and "partial" simply speak of what degree or extent man is sinful. Those who believe in partial depravity feel that man is not so sinful that he cannot come to Christ by his own free will. Those who believe in total depravity feel that man has total inability to come to Christ in his natural state and needs a sovereign intervention of God and divine enablement in order to trust in Christ.

There is no question in my mind that the Bible teaches the total depravity and total inability of the unregenerate man to come to Christ. God must work a sovereign miracle to bring the unsaved man to Christ. Men cannot be saved without a direct and special intervention of God and the overcoming operation of the Holy Spirit.

This conviction about total inability is not just my own invention. It has been held by the historic Protestant Church.

The Episcopalians in the Thirty-nine Articles state: "The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God. . ."

The Baptists in the Philadelphia Confession state: "Man by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself or to prepare himself thereunto."

The Presbyterians in the Westminster Confession believe: "Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto."

The Beginning of Depravity: To understand man's natural inability to come to Christ, we must go back to Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve had a free will under the sovereignty of God. They had no sin nature as we do today, so they were free not to sin. Though they could be tempted, they could not be compelled or impelled to sin. Adam and Eve chose as a deliberate act of their wills to sin. This was a free act. Immediately upon doing this act, they became sinners, separated from God, put under a curse and declared guilty. Adam and Eve also received a sin nature and this sin nature affected the whole of their personalities - will, mind and heart. The sin nature now tainted and corrupted every part of their beings and they lost their free wills. Their wills were now enslaved by sin.

The Depths of Depravity: The sin nature was then passed from Adam and Eve to every member of the human race so that men are born with minds that are corrupt. ". . . being darkened in understanding" (Eph. 4:18). They are born with emotions that are twisted. "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil" (John 3:10). And they are also born with wills that are perverted. "Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is the slave of sin'" (John 8:34).

The unconverted man's will is enslaved to his sinful nature and takes orders from his sinful mind and heart. Man is so sinful that he not only will not come to Christ, but he cannot come to Christ. He possesses a fixed bias of his will towards God. Natural man is free but he always acts according to his own desires and does as he pleases. Therefore, he always pleases to do evil and to choose for self and against God. Man does will; he does exercise volition; he does choose; he does decide, but he always does so for himself and not for God.

Man is free in the same way a bird with a broken wing is free to fly but can't. Man is free like a bird in a cage who is controlled by boundaries. Man is free like a man in jail - he can stand up, sit down or spit! Just because natural man has the ability to choose against God, we dare not assume he also has the ability to choose for God. Only if man is not a sinner does he have innate ability to choose for God. If he is not a sinner, then Christianity is a hoax and a farce. Because of sin man does not have innate ability to come to Christ. Just because water flows down hill may we assume that it has the ability to flow up hill? Is it logical to assume that because a person can jump from the top of a mountain to the valley below that he can jump from the valley to the top of the mountain? Free will Biblically is a myth, for in actuality, there is no such thing as free will. Martin Luther said, "Free will is an empty term, whose reality is lost. And a lost liberty, according to my grammar, is no liberty at all."

In light of the Biblical teaching on sin and our theological understanding of the nature of man, can we now say that man has the freedom to choose good, to choose Jesus Christ, to come to God? The answer is a resounding: No! Man needs a supernatural work of God to come to Christ!

Spurgeon hits the issue of free will right on the head when he says,

It is strange how people, when talking about free will, talk of things which they do not at all understand. "Now," says one, "I believe men can be saved if they will." My dear sir, that is not the question at all. The question is, are men ever found naturally willing to submit to the humbling terms of the Gospel of Christ? We declare upon scriptural authority that the human will is so desperately set on mischief, so depraved, and so inclined to everything that is evil, and so disinclined to everything that is good, that without the powerful, supernatural, irresistible influence of the Holy Spirit, no human will will ever be constrained towards Christ.

FREE WILL PRACTICALLY CONSIDERED

Perhaps you are not yet satisfied that man is unable to come to Christ and your mind flashes to when Christ said to the Jews, "You are unwilling (will not) to come to me, that you may have life" (Jn. 5:40) and, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling (would not)" (Matt. 23:37). Christ did not say they "could not" but they "would not," indicating they could have come if they so desired. Wait a minute! This merely proves the point of total depravity and total inability. They would not come because they wanted their own way; they were bound to their own sinful natures. They would not come because they were basically sinful and rebellious.

Furthermore, these verses are dealing with man's response to the gospel. Remember, man lost the ability to believe in the Fall but he never lost the responsibility to believe. Man is responsible for his unbelief and will be judged because of it. What man needs is a work of God's grace. He needs God to intervene.

Spurgeon clearly understood that at the bottom of his salvation was God and God alone. He says,

One weeknight, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, "How did you come to be a Christian?" I sought the Lord. "But how did you come to seek the Lord?" The truth flashed across my mind in a moment, -- I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me see Him. I prayed, thought I; but then I asked myself, How came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures? I did read them; but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith; and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, "I ascribe my change wholly to God."

Perhaps you are still asking yourself, "Well, if men cannot believe unless enabled by God, then why did God give us the command to believe in Christ and give the commission to preach the gospel to all men? Has God mocked and tricked us? Is God really sincere when He offers men the gospel?" Wait a minute! Do not draw wrong conclusions. God is sincere and faithful. God solemnly promises salvation to "whosoever will" receive Christ. However, "whosoever will" is not the same as "anyone is able." We preach a "whosoever will" gospel to the world, appealing to their wills to respond, but we also preach to a "universal won't world." We, therefore, put our confidence in God to move men towards Christ. The reason we pray for the lost is because we know that God must overrule in their lives, if they are to trust Christ and be saved. We pray because we know that God's will must overpower man's rebellion and stubborn will. If man had a free will, there would be no need for prayer. If you have ever prayed, "Lord, save that man!", you, practically speaking, have acknowledged that God must do something for that person that he cannot do for himself and have admitted experientially that free will is not resident in that person.

You might then ask, "Well, what if the whole world should come to Christ?" Great! Then Christ shall receive the whole world because God would be working in their sinful lives to bring them to the Saviour. God accepts any and all who come to Christ!

Perhaps you still have some lingering doubts about man's inability to respond to Christ because you remember your own conversion. You recall how you came to a place where you invited Christ into your life as your Saviour and Lord. All of us are free willers by nature because this is a hang over from our unconverted days when we wanted to be free and independent of God. When we came to Christ, we only knew from our experience that we were seeking God, but did not understand that God was also seeking us.

We must remember that God saves a man through his human will, not apart from it. No one denies that a sinner must trust in Jesus Christ by an act of his will. Neither has anyone ever come to Christ against his own will, but if he did come, it was the sovereign grace of God quietly working in the person so as to make him willing to believe. Yes, a choice must be made for Christ. A decision must be arrived at to bow to Christ's Lordship. Your will must positively respond to Jesus Christ, but behind your human will was and is the sovereign will of God to bring you, a helpless and hopeless sinner to Himself. Ultimately, salvation depends upon sovereign free grace, not free will. Let us thank God that salvation does not ultimately depend on man's free will, for if it did, then not one person would ever be saved. All would choose against Christ if it was left up to man's free will. Martin Luther said, "If any man does ascribe anything of salvation, even the very least, to the free will of man, he knoweth nothing of grace, and has not learned Jesus Christ aright."

CONCLUSION

Are you without Christ today? You need grace. You need a miracle. You need God to intervene in your life and enable you to believe in Christ. God must work in you or you will never be saved. I may beg you on my knees to receive Christ. I may plead with tears in my eyes, and show you the horrors of hell and the joys of heaven. I may persuade you of your own lost condition and show you the sufficiency of Christ to save you, but you will not come to Christ unless God's Spirit convicts, draws and regenerates you.

Yet, sinner, do you feel your sinfulness? God is convicting you. Do you desire to have your sins forgiven? God is drawing you. Do you want to be saved? God is about to regenerate you. If God enables you, nothing in earth, heaven or hell can stop you from believing. God changes inability to ability. Remember, Christ receives sinners and He will receive you if you will but come to Him and trust Him as your Lord and Saviour. Christ came to save the helpless, not help the savable.

When you do come to Christ, you will then know God worked grace in you to bring you to that point of decision. Charles Wesley, who rejected theologically the truth of sovereign grace, nevertheless believed it in his experience (as all Christians do). He wrote:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray;
I woke--the dungeon flamed with light!
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.